

**Keene, Donald**

***Frog in the Well: Portraits of Japan  
by Watanabe Kazan, 1793-1841***

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Watanabe Kazan was persecuted as a traitor and died a martyr in exile, his failure to perform his duties as a samurai finally driving him to ritual suicide. An accomplished Confucian scholar, painter, and *rangaku* (Dutch Studies) enthusiast, Kazan was a conservative whose moral sensibilities exemplified the socio-intellectual standards of the Tokugawa order. He was also a free thinker, however, who did not hesitate to develop adversarial political views and artistic styles that incorporated controversial Western ideas. In the end, his eclectic talents caused him to fall victim to the paranoia and moral ambivalence of his age, for though he was admired and trusted by his colleagues, few would step forward to expose the fraudulence of his persecution.

Donald Keene's *Frog in the Well* is both a biography of Kazan and a commentary on this troubled time in Japanese history. Keene's is a familiar, fatherly voice for most of us. His narrative style here is fluid, comfortable, and asks the reader for a certain complacency that one would expect from a Penguin publication but less so from the Columbia University Press. (The book's striking, dark green print also prepares us to expect something distinct from this publisher's usual fare.) Readers may balk at Keene's undisguised fondness for Kazan and his generous use of sensationalistic descriptors like "brilliant" and "unprecedented." They may find suspicious his tendency to interpret Kazan's inconsistencies—his anguish, failings, and even transgressions—as hallmarks of Confucian virtue and to highlight episodes that will reaffirm Kazan's admirable qualities. A lengthy account of his search for O-gin, mother of Miyake Tomonobu, the illegitimate and therefore "retired" son of the Tahara daimyo, for example, appears to offer less historical relevance than it does an appropriate context to recount Kazan's gentleness, generosity, open-heartedness, and magnanimity. If one, as a reader, does not submit to Keene's anecdotal style and goes looking for

theoretical complexity, in other words, the narrative is in peril of coming across as facile. The research is not facile, however, substantiated as it is by diaries, letters, depositions, essays, poems, and paintings, but merely camouflaged by Keene's skill in delivering an enjoyable reading experience.

The book's first two chapters form the historical backdrop for Kazan's story. The first revisits fundamental information familiar to anyone who knows Japan: China's impact on Japanese culture, the arrival of the Europeans, the Tokugawa social order, and the emergence of *rangaku*, amounting to little more than a thin digest of Keene's wonderful *The Japanese Discovery of Europe: 1720-1830* (Stanford, 1969). Titled "Japan in 1793," Chapter Two is intended to historicize Kazan's age but does so by jumping altogether too easily between disparate topics: from Matsudaira Sadanobu, to the imperial institution, to Kazan's painting, for instance. This overly loose organization afflicts much of the book and often succeeds in rendering only a disorienting pastiche of Kazan's world. Surely in a biographical study of Watanabe Kazan it is puzzling to conclude a three-page discussion of Emperor Kōkaku by stating merely that Kazan never had any reason to be concerned with him (p. 39).

Through the third and fourth chapters the reader becomes increasingly appreciative of Kazan's importance as an innovative thinker and artist. These sections make extensive use of Kazan's early paintings and diaries to illustrate the development of a classic internal conflict between devotion to duty (*giri*) and human emotion (*ninjō*)—in his case the clash between energies required to perform domainal obligations and his passion to excel as a painter. But it is to uncertain effect that Keene mixes discussions of art, politics, and *rangaku* so readily, as doing so casts Kazan's art as unduly political, and at times causes these middle chapters to lose narrative coherence. Art, *rangaku*, and politics pulled Kazan in opposing directions, causing him anguish and eventually triggering his persecution and death, but the quick transitions between them—as the shift from an interview with Dutch trading director Johannes Niemann directly into an analysis of the iconography in Kazan's paintings (p. 138)—produces an abrupt, disorienting effect. Nonetheless, Keene is to be credited for injecting interdisciplinarity into biography, interpreting art history through political history in this case, and one hopes that his efforts to tie together the multiple threads of Kazan's life will lay the groundwork for future cross-disciplinary approaches to the field.

In spite of their oddly loose organization, the book's middle and later chapters are engaging and effectively consolidate the various dimensions of Kazan's persona. Considering that Kazan has received more attention as a political figure than as an artist, the experience of discovering his artistic innovations proves especially fascinating. Keene culls from Kazan's writings the seminal events of the latter's life, and his practiced, elegant prose weaves them into absorbing plots that are handsomely complemented by thirty-eight illustrations, all but a few in color. Though it is regrettably tempting to find fault with this narrative style, ultimately it compromises the book's reliability only at the rare instances when it sacrifices complexity, as when it inhibits Keene from exploring the intriguing contradictions that float to the surface of Kazan's writings. The fact that Kazan was both a staunch Confucian and an artist attracted to a *bunjin* ethos rooted in heretical schools of thought, for instance, poses an interesting paradox that is left unexplored. In a letter to his disciple Tsubaki Chinzan (1801-1854), Kazan outlines his preference for realism in landscape painting and decries the abstractions popular among contemporary works of that genre, which he compares to the "heresy" (*itan*) of Laozi and Zhuangzi (p. 207). This otherwise unremarkable statement in support of aesthetic orthodoxy stands in interesting contrast to Kazan's explicit and implicit reverential allusions to Zhuangzi in his letters (p. 205), paintings (p. 215), and poems (p. 218). Allowing this inconsistency to pass without comment conveys a misleading view of Kazan's intellectual loyalties and a false impression about the reception of Daoism in the Tokugawa period, and within the *bunjin* arts in particular. Keene's explanation of the *bunjin* tradition in East Asia (pp. 199-202)—a discussion that would have been helpful early in the book rather than near the end—also overlooks Daoist influences entirely.

Minor qualms aside, the book is substantive and its strengths outshine its deficiencies. Particularly welcome is its analysis of Kazan's extraordinary paintings, which have not received due attention outside the field of art history. Keene brings Kazan's art within reach of non-specialists, for whom a two-paragraph analysis of a given work's stylistic and historical significance is enough. Here he relies predominantly on Japanese scholarship, which is comprehensive but has been hindered by a compulsion to interpret and explain history in terms of a modernization that unfolds in a linear pattern through causal events. Traces of this are detectable in Keene's diction: words like "individualist" and

"reformer" suggesting interpretations that view Kazan as driving Japanese history toward modernization. Though a recurring subtext throughout the book, the notion of Kazan as a modernizer and prophet of *kaikoku* is not openly articulated until the final pages, and Keene is careful to do so only through the voices of other Kazan scholars. Wisely refusing to add his own voice to this fray, Keene's purpose remains refreshingly simple: to recover the life and art of an extraordinary man misunderstood by his contemporaries and persecuted for his foresight.

*Frog in the Well* is a narrative hagiography with a storybook style that will soar or suffer depending on how the reader receives it. Critical readers will find Keene's devotion to an overly tidy, seamless storyline uncomfortably conjectural. More forgiving audiences will be content to discover and be moved by Kazan's accomplishments and failures. In the end, nearly all will share an appreciation of the project as an excavation of a compelling historical figure. Kazan's independence and curiosity in Dutch Studies enabled him to make important innovations in painting, to see his world in ways that were incomprehensible to his contemporaries, and to become one of the singular competent voices within his domain's leadership. The conflict between his loyalties, judgments, and personal convictions also makes him a fine lens through which to view the contradictions of late Tokugawa society and politics. It is gratifying to see that academic publishing still has a place for narrative biographical studies that deliver a lively, memorable reading experience to a broad audience, for while this charming book will not change our view of late Tokugawa history, it will certainly bring that history to life.